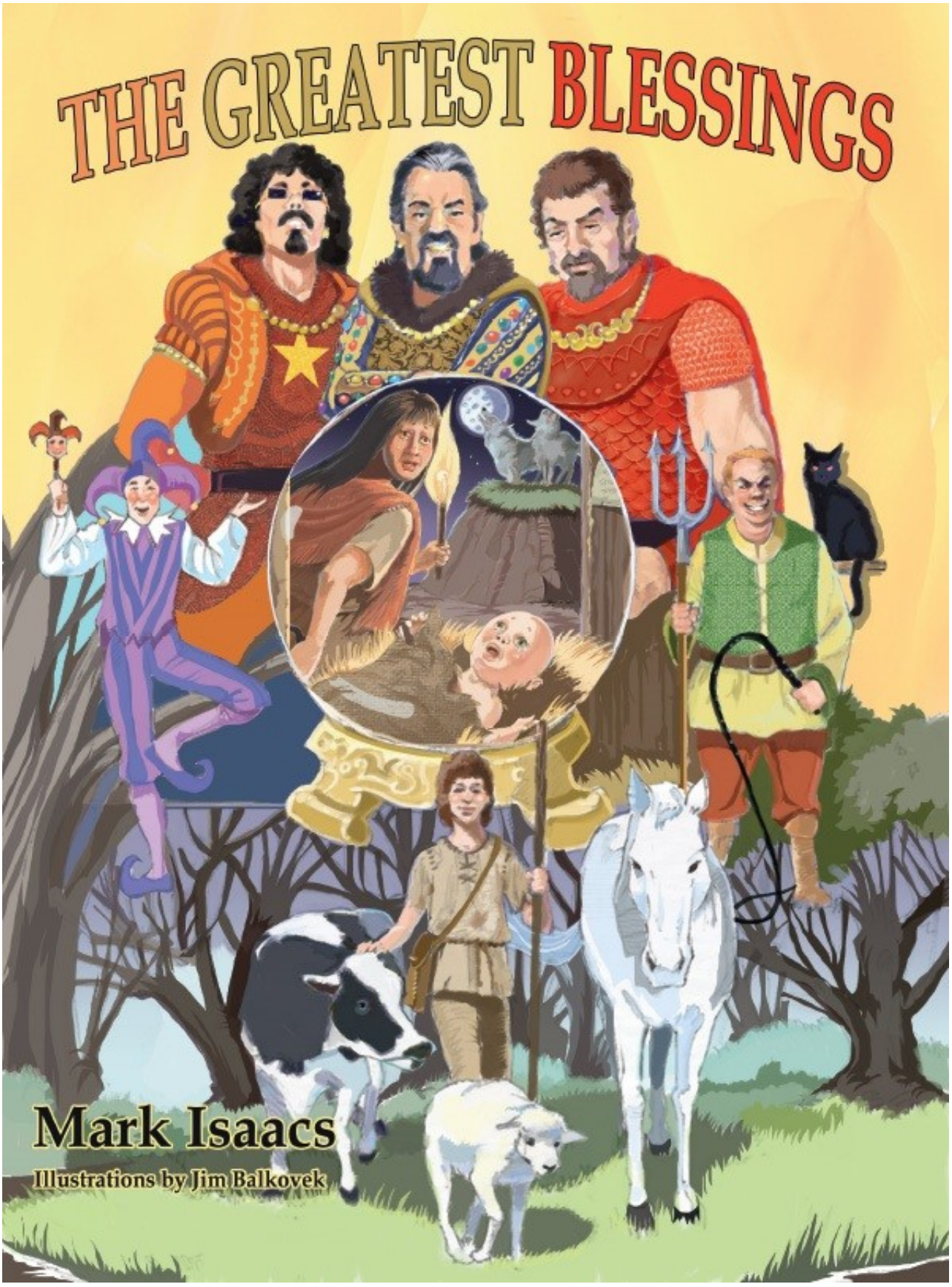
THE GREATEST BLESSINGS
Mark Isaacs
Illustrations by Jim Balkovek

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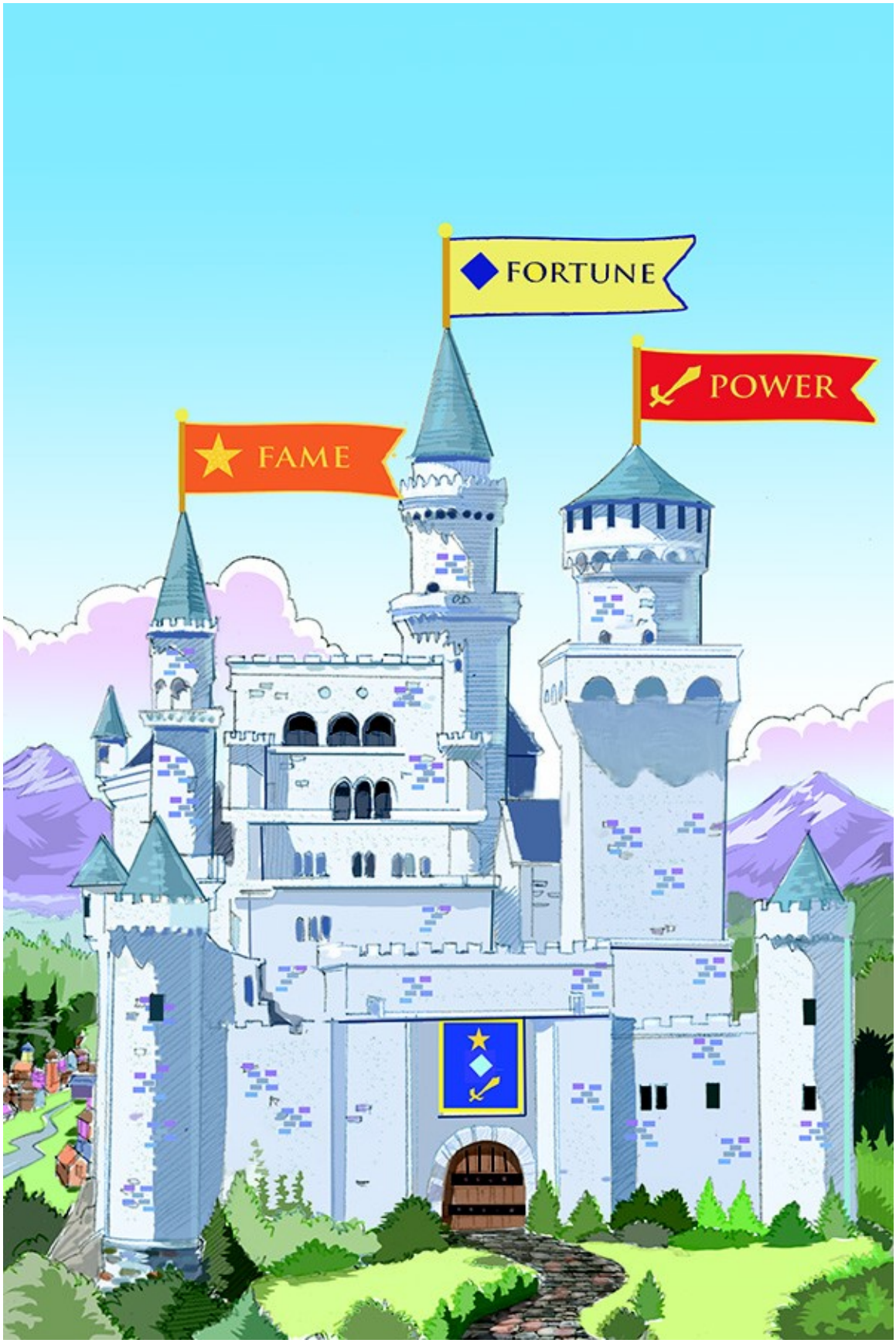
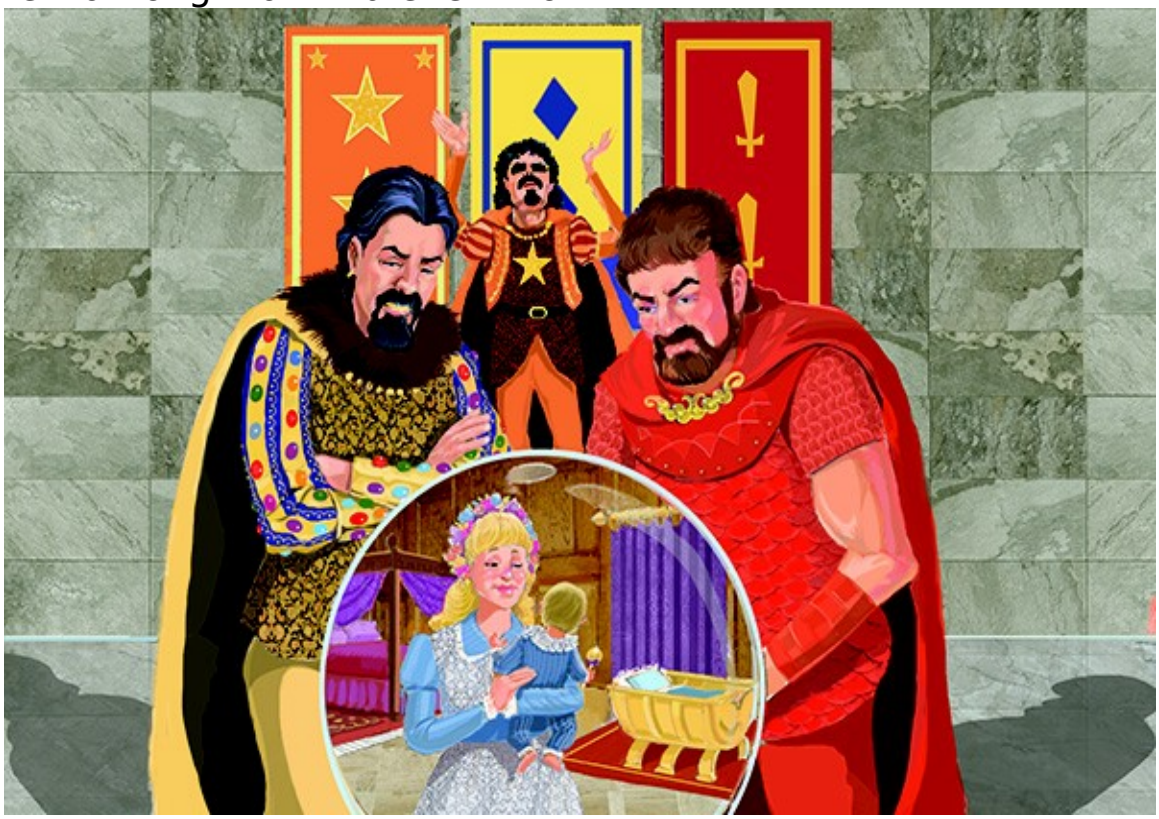
For mothers everywhere,
who set their children on the right path


FORTUNE
POWER
FAME

I

THERE ONCE THRIVED in a magnificent palace in a fabulous paradise three glorious lords upon whom the success of all people rested. The names of the lords, who were also brothers, were Fame, Fortune and Power, and they alone dispensed those earthly desires named after them that mankind coveted above all others. They did so on the first birthday of a babe, when the child who is the parent of the adult begins to take shape. At that time, they would gaze into their large crystal ball and dole out a measure of the human longings they commanded to the tot, according to how much he or she pleased them. If, for instance, the babe tickled one of the brothers pink, the lord would chant a magical incantation that bestowed a future of great fame, fortune or power upon the tot. If two brothers were thus smitten, greatness in two of those three realms lay ahead. Rare but not unheard of was the babe who won the hearts of

all three brothers, for that little one would enjoy a life of towering glory, wealth and dominance that none but a select few among mankind ever know.



Of course, not all babes pleased the vain and selfish brothers to such an extent, but by and large every tot amused their lordships well enough to merit measures of the earthly desires that they commanded. He or she would go on to live a life of modest note, wage and rule for bringing twinkles to the lords' eyes, smiles to their lips, chuckles to

their mouths or butterflies to their tummies. Woe to the babe who brought naught, rarer than those who would reach the dizzying heights of earthly desires. For that poor innocent was destined to live a life of misery, never to enjoy the slightest sliver of note, wage or rule from crib until casket.

Such a fate awaited an infant who had the misfortune of being forsaken shortly after his birth in a barn, where his unwed mother tearfully abandoned him in a stack of straw one star-crossed night. He was a most wretched thing. Pale and clad in rags, he had the wrinkled face of a pug, with the same doleful eyes that have melted many an onlooker’s heart. So much did he look like the dog, indeed, that when a mean black cat looked upon him soon after his mother left, the feral feline arched its back in fright and hissed most violently.

Left alone, hungry for suckling and caressing, the babe wailed through the night. The rich farmer in whose barn he had been born heard his cries in the morning and found him squirming helplessly in the straw. Even though Fortune had been generous to the farmer on his first birthday and he could well afford to take in the foundling to raise, his only concern was for his cherished wealth, which such an

upbringing would surely diminish. Certain that no one else would want the accursed thing, the farmer resolved to take him into the forest and leave him to the ravenous wolves that lurked there. But as he laid out the helpless babe for them to devour, he was suddenly struck with a most villainous notion. *Why not keep the kid and exploit him soon enough for hard labor in exchange for the meanest of provisions?* he thought*. I could turn a tidy sum on such a measly investment!*

Congratulating himself on his latest scheme to enrich himself, the greedy farmer snatched the infant into his arms and carried him away. As the hungry wolves eyed him angrily for taking away the tasty tot, it was uncertain whether the poor babe would have been better off left in the glade for them to eat.

II

WHEN CAME HIS TURN for the lords' appraisal, the babe showed not a single virtue to make them smile. So unremarkable was he, indeed, that the brothers' eyes glazed over as they stood and looked upon him, and they had to shake their heads vigorously to keep from falling asleep and falling flat on their faces. Needless to say, the lords passed him over for even the slightest sliver of the favours that were theirs to bestow.

The years passed. At the tender age of four, the foundling began a life of endless toil on the greedy farmer's estate, responding to the name Boy because the farmer deemed him unworthy to be christened with a proper name. While the farmer's three spoiled children played and learned their lessons in their stately manor, Boy worked from dawn until dusk tending to the farmer's many menial chores. Every day in the years to come he had to work until he was dead

on his heels, and what's more eat the same foul gruel and sleep in the same grim barn as the farmer's livestock, all as the farmer had heartlessly plotted in the forest.

While his lot was hard, Boy never complained. Even as the cruel farmer and his mean children thrashed and heaped scorn upon him, he felt blessed as he grew. For he had good clean air to breathe, an abundance of succulent wild berries in the forest to pick, and a nearby river where he could drink all of the clear, fresh water he wanted—as well as steal a cool dip on hot summer days. Most precious to him, however, were the many gentle farm animals he tended who were his only friends. Boy loved them all but especially Sheep, Cow and Horse, kindred spirits whom the farmer never bothered to name and called as such, even though he had given all of his other sheep, cows and horses fond names.

You see, the farmer scorned Sheep because he was scraggly and did not beget much valuable wool, Cow

because she was frail and would never win any ribbons at the shire faire, and Horse because he was puny and could not tote as much as the other horses. He and his children flogged and tormented Sheep, Cow and Horse whenever they found chance. Boy dared not step in lest the wicked farmer give his friends a more severe lashing with his whip just to spite him.

But at the end of every day, Boy did his utmost to ease their suffering and misery by ministering to their injuries with soothing rubdowns, and feeding them sweet red apples he had plucked from a smiling tree. In return, Sheep, Cow and Horse nuzzled Boy for his loving kindness, displays of affection that he treasured beyond measure as they were the only tender touches he had ever known. He felt blessed to have such loving companions in his life.

III

In his thirteenth year it occurred to Boy that he didn’t need the farmer, that indeed he could do as well on his own as he could under the heavy yoke he bore in silence. So one night after the farmer and his pampered brood had gone to sleep in their warm and fluffy beds, he packed a knapsack. Then, reaching down into a cubbyhole he had dug beneath his straw bed, he pulled out a few coins he had found and hidden from the greedy farmer, who would have taken them otherwise. Placing them in clear view to redress the farmer for what he was about to do, for he was true and honest, Boy then opened the pens of Sheep, Cow and Horse.

Seeing him beckon them, the three loyal friends followed Boy to the barn door, where he peeked out to make sure no one was about. When he was satisfied that the way was clear, Boy and his friends crept off into the darkness.

With only a torch to keep the ravenous wolves at bay, the quartet bravely made its way down to the river.

Now it was on a bank of this great waterway that Boy had labored tirelessly for many a long sleepless night, all to build a raft big and sturdy enough for his friends and him to escape from the farmer’s evil clutches. He had timed their departure for now, when the night was still young and their chance to get away was at its greatest. For every moment that they dallied increased the chance that the farmer would catch them and punish them severely for their treachery with the lash of his whip. Boy shuddered at the thought and hastened to board his trusting friends in a shallow cove. He then pushed away with a long pole that he had whittled from a plump oak branch, and moments later the fleeing four were gladdened to find themselves drifting away in the moon-kissed lazy current.

But in the blink of an eye their happiness turned to sheer panic when the howl of a wolf made Sheep reel back

lickety-split. His rear legs went overboard as he did and only a front hoof wedged between timbers kept him from falling entirely into the deep water, where he would most certainly drown. Hearing Sheep issue a most frightening bleat, Boy rushed from the front of the craft to the back, where his poor friend’s hoof was coming loose from its hold. Seeing the terror in Sheep’s eyes Boy lunged for his front legs and clasped them just as his hoof popped out and he began to slip away into the water. Pulling with every last ounce of his strength Boy just managed to heave the hapless Sheep back on board. Wiping his brow, Boy sighed as Sheep baaed, Cow mooed and Horse whinnied into the starry sky.

***

The peril in their wake, the troop traveled for many a mile before Boy finally drew the raft to shore and Sheep, Cow and Horse scampered off, grateful to be on land again. Pushing the raft back into the current to float away to the distant sea, Boy guided his friends into a thick dark forest and beyond. He was careful not to let anyone see them, for the wicked farmer might get word of their whereabouts and hunt them down. Thus on guard Boy led his friends on and on, taking only brief breaks for them to graze or nap. Through dales, woods, fields and streams and up crags and hillocks they journeyed, weary to the bone but glad to be away from the farmer’s terrible lash.

Finally, after long weeks of travel over many a league, Boy found a remote vale where only the most daring would venture. Here, he decided, was a place where they could all live in peace and security, free from ravenous wolves. So with Sheep, Cow and Horse helping him transport branches and twigs from a nearby thicket, he built a thatched shanty for them all to dwell. It was a most humble abode. But a stone hearth to warm them on snowy winter days and a skylight to let in the sparkly stars on cool summer nights

made it a palace compared to the grim barn they had known. Thus safe and sound the seasons passed for the little band, Boy and his friends living happily if meagerly on their safe patch of land, far, far away from the evil farmer.

IV

ALL THIS WHILE, Fame, Fortune and Power continued to bestow their boons as they felt amused. The world was not nearly such a populous place in those olden days of yore, and the brothers found themselves with plenty of idle time to keep occupied. One day, partly to start a squabble, Fame snootily observed that if a babe could have only one of their three greatest blessings, as all deemed their favours, his would prove the most excellent.

“When you are famous others attend to your every need and desire, thereby creating a life of splendor and servility that belittles both of your favours,” Fame pronounced from his garlanded throne. Fame was the handsomest of the three brothers, and always wore dark sunglasses that he had had the royal window-maker concoct to make him look even more dashing than he already was.

“Pssh,” Fortune sneered from his gilded throne. Fortune was the richest of the three brothers, and smiled often to flaunt the gold teeth-caps he had had the royal dentist make so he could show off his fabulous wealth even more. “You have clearly taken leave of your feeble senses. Why even a fool knows that money makes the world go around. You cannot live without it, and what better way to achieve prominence and influence than having a treasure trove overflowing with gold, diamonds and precious jewels?”

“Humph, you have lost your mind as well,” Power scoffed from his stout throne. Power was the strongest of the three brothers, and liked to puff his chest to pop the buttons off the shirts he had the royal tailors make a size too small. “What man doth not esteem power above all? With power doth the king collect all the revenues he desires, and is famous throughout his realm besides. Why there is no need for either one of your trite favours when mine answers all.”

Not a second passed after Power spoke that last word before a tremendous uproar arose, with each of the brothers arguing at the top of his lungs that his favour was the greatest of their three. The racket they made was so loud that the palace bell was drowned out, and a deaf old gent of the royal court heard for the first time in years. This hubbub went on for days and days, until finally the lords’ court jester Nobody inched forward and bowed.

“My lords, may I offer a thought that might well resolve your quarrel?” the clown squeaked. His beanpole of a body quivered like a birch in a gale for his masters were in a bad temper, and would surely have him put in stocks if his proposal proved preposterous.

The fuming lords turned their fiery eyes upon Nobody.

“Well speak, fool,” Fortune said impatiently when the clown stood cowering silently for some seconds.

“Well here it is then,” Nobody stammered. “You seek out a bereft soul who has been blessed with nary a pinch of your three supreme favours and promise him full reign of but one. Let this fair and unclouded grown outcast reveal that which is the greatest of your hallowed blessings.”

After what seemed an eternity to Nobody but actually was no more than mere moments, the lords nodded to one another and Nobody felt the crisis pass. Power stood and raised his giant goblet to the clown, who had ably demonstrated that age-old maxim that the wisest man is a

fool. “Leave it to Nobody the Nothing to come up with something!” Power toasted.

V

And so the three brothers and Nobody set out on a quest to find such an outcast, the lords taking along a portable crystal ball so they did not get behind in their blessings. The company traveled long and hard through town, village and countryside to find that rare someone whom they had found unworthy of their favours. Finally, just when they were about to throttle Nobody for his harebrained scheme, they sighted a promising bony specimen from atop a hillock, standing on a paltry farm amongst a scraggly sheep, frail cow and puny horse.

Now the object of their attentions, it turns out, was none other than Boy, the same who had stolen off with his companions lo those handful of years ago, now grown to eighteen. As he watched the official-looking party descend from its summit to his lowland, his heart pounded in alarm that, after all the years that had passed, the sheriff had finally found out his whereabouts and come to return Sheep, Cow and Horse to the cruel farmer.

“Who goes there?” Boy called out as the party drew near, the lords astride their noble steeds.

“Behold, their supreme lords Fame, Fortune and Power do approach in peace,” Nobody called out from atop his winded donkey Heehaw.

Boy felt his tense limber limbs ease. It was not the sheriff after all but the legendary lords who governed all people’s success. But what were such luminaries doing at his humble farm? he wondered.

“And who may you be?” Boy asked as Nobody and the lords drew up, Sheep, Cow and Horse watching from the shanty.

“I? I am Nobody.”

“Greetings, Nobody, and you as well, sires,” Boy said bowing.

“How come you to stand in this field alone?” Nobody asked.

“A foundling with none but my friends you see before you, I came here to make my way in the world.”

“Do your labours earn wage?”

“None, for I have nothing of value to offer. Besides, I come in contact with no man.”

“Then you hold sway over no one.”

“Only myself. Why do you ask these questions?”

“To see if you are worthy, pitiful young man,” Nobody answered happily. “And I am pleased to say you are, for my lords bear great tidings.”

“Aye?” Boy said with a raised eyebrow.

“Aye. Since it is clear that you did not get a measure of fame, fortune and power at your first birthday, now their lords would like to make up for your great loss. All they ask

in exchange is that you listen as each offers you his greatest blessing, and decide which you value most. Thereupon, that supreme blessing shall be yours.”

Boy spoke. “The proposition of the distinguished lords is generous, sir, but I have no need of even the least of any of their blessings. I say in truth that despite my meager circumstances, I am blessedly content as my life stands now. I pray, gentlemen, that you shall not take offense if I bid you all a good day, and return to my humble dwelling where I have much work that awaits.”

Thus spoken Boy began to walk away, but was stopped short when the lords’ encircled him on their steeds and brandished fierce swords. Sheep, Cow and Horse looked on in awful fright at Boy’s plight. The end appeared at hand for their faithful protector.

VI

BOY STARTED TO SPEAK but Nobody cut him off. “Enough of your impudence. You shall hold your tongue while each lord has his say and choose one of their blessings as commanded. Either oblige or this day shall be the last you ever set your eyes upon.” The lords nodded.

Boy looked at his trembling friends before facing the party once more. “If it was but me, I would gladly make this day my last. But I have my dear friends to think of. I shall

forswear comment as each lord speaks and make a choice as you command.”

Satisfied, the lords sheathed their swords. Sheep, Cow and Horse stirred the soil beneath them with heavy sighs of relief.

Nobody too let out a deep breath and wiped his beading brow. “Very well, then, let us proceed,” he said. “I shall now introduce the favours the lords stand over, according to straws drawn by them. I shall begin with the blessing of fortune. Should this favour be your choice, you shall be the richest man in all the lands of the world.”

Nobody held out his hand to Fortune, who spoke from astride his noble steed, heeled in horseshoes made of solid gold.

“It shall be my pleasure to fill an enormous cave with gold, diamonds and precious jewels for you to romp about in,” he said spreading out his hands most extravagantly. “You shall have treasure enough to buy ten kingdoms if your heart so desires.”

Boy thought momentarily before speaking. “Forgive me, sire,” he said with a bow, “but I must tell you that such a treasure holds no attraction for me, and I shall respectfully pass it by.”

Fame and Power tittered over Boy's spurning of Fortune's ultimate prize package.

"What!" Fortune cried out in surprise, his golden mouth agape. "You forsake riches that even King Midas would envy?"

"Aye," Boy said, looking fondly upon Sheep, Cow and Horse. "You see, I am already blessed with all the fortune and more that any man could desire."

"You truly find a few worthless farm animals more valuable than vast untold riches?" Fortune said, crinkling his forehead in astonishment.

"Much more valuable, sire," Boy said soundly, gently stroking the threadbare Sheep's coat. "We may be poor in riches but what we lack there, we more than make up with our family bond. For what is more priceless than the love of your family? Nay, all the riches in the world would pale in comparison to the value of a loving family. Indeed, I am so

wealthy on that score, I daresay my heart would burst into a thousand pieces if laden with your kind offer.”

Nobody wiped away a smile of approval at Boy’s words as an irate Fortune took notice. It was not good to upset any of the lords.

VII

“So be it,” Nobody said with a straight face to wrap up the first presentation. “I shall proceed then to fame. Should this

favour be your choice, you shall be the most illustrious man in all the lands of the world.”

Nobody nodded to Fame and Boy indeed paid heed.

“It shall be my privilege to place you among the gods in renown,” Fame said as he curled his fingers pompously. “Your name shall be held in the same wide repute and awe as those of Zeus, Hera and Poseidon in their most legendary of legendary times.”

Boy reflected. “With all due honor, sire, such fame does not beckon as well,” he said moments later with another bow.

This time Fortune tittered while Power whooped and did a war dance over the victory that was now his to crow over.

“But think of it, young man,” a flustered Fame implored, his eyes peering over the top of his fashionable sunglasses. “People shall sing your praises to the high heavens. You shall be denied no courtesy, not the pettiest

wish anywhere you travel. From one end of the world to the other, you shall be known and celebrated."

"That is what weighs heavily on my heart," Boy said, looking fondly again upon Sheep, Cow and Horse. "You see if a certain personage were to learn of my whereabouts, these friends I treasure beyond measure would be lost. Such a loss I could not bear."

"But surely the loss of a few unimportant farm animals can't be that important to you," Fame said, crinkling his forehead.

"More than important," Boy said firmly, scratching the scrawny Cow's head. "My friends may not be noteworthy but I could search the world far and wide and not find their like, for we have shared a past that none but us shall ever know. Nay, all the admirers in the world would not fill the void left in my heart by the loss of but a single one of them. Yea, my heart would burst for a different reason if laden with your offer."

“Well said, young man, bravo!” Power roared triumphantly as he dismounted his noble steed. As he did, Nobody quickly wiped another smile off his face as a glowering Fame took notice and jumped from his own mount toward the court jester. Nobody braced his beanpole of a body for the worst.

VIII

THANK GOODNESS Fame only wanted to stretch his legs, walking stiffly about as Power embraced Boy. The muscle man smirked at his brothers. “Well, that settles it then, power carries the day. Hurrah! Huzzah! And hip hip hooray!”

“A moment, my lord,” Nobody said. “You must first present your favour and allow the young man to affirm it.”

“But he already has,” Power said. “The alternative is too grisly to imagine,” he said drawing a finger across his thick neck.

Sheep, Cow and Horse began to tremble anew.

“Yea, but perhaps he will reconsider and claim Fame’s or Fortune’s bid upon hearing yours,” Nobody said. Those two nodded.

“Very well then, since my brothers cannot seem to concede the obvious,” Power said confidently, not believing Boy would change his mind. “Have done with your silly formality.”

Nobody turned to Boy. “I shall conclude with power, then. Should this favour be your choice, you shall be the most imperious man in all the lands of the world.”

Power lumbered forward. “It shall be my honor to give you sway over the mightiest army ever assembled,” he said as he clenched his fists forcefully. “You shall stand dominant

above all others in all matters of war, and of all matters for that matter.”

Boy pondered. “Such a standing I must decline as well, sire,” he said thereafter.

Fame tittered while Fortune enjoyed a hearty laugh at Power's comeuppance. Tit for tat, so they say.

"Decline?" a puzzled Power said, his muscular chest drooping beneath his tightly woven shirt. His buttons would not pop for now. "Think well, Boy, you could rule the world, not to mention save your neck."

"Still, I shall have no part of it," Boy said. He stretched out his hand toward Sheep and Cow. "For should I stand dominant I would be above my companions, and violate the equal fellowship we have so harmoniously established."

"You mean to say you willingly place yourself on an equal footing with a few weak farm animals, as fellows one and all?" Power said, crinkling his forehead.

"More than willingly," Boy said resolutely, patting the piddling Horse's muzzle. "This fellowship is the foundation of the supreme happiness we all enjoy, even in the bleakest of times. Ah, if only the people of the world would seek

brotherhood instead of dominance, it would be a far better place.”

“Touché!” Nobody couldn’t help but shout out. Power was already vexed by Boy’s spurning and Nobody’s cheer set him off. Arms outstretched to strangle him he lurched at the jester, who scampered behind Fame and Fortune and fretted. If the muscle man got ahold of him, this day would be the last he ever set his eyes upon.

IX

IT TOOK ALL THE STRENGTH of Fame and Fortune combined to hold back Power but he soon calmed. Nobody peeked out from between his bodyguards and swallowed, grateful to be able to do so. “So which of Fame’s or Fortune’s favours do you choose?” he asked Boy.

“Neither,” Boy said. “I say nay to all for all pale alike.”

“But that means … “ Nobody could not bear to complete his unspeakable thought.

Boy nodded.

“Please choose,” Nobody pleaded, but Boy shook his head.

Nobody grimaced. “Well, my lords, I am sorry to say that my proposal has come to naught and a draw has been reached,” he said sadly. “None of your blessings ranks above the others. Instead, all are equal, just as the good young man is on a par to his companions.”

Fame and Fortune stepped aside and looked sternly at Nobody. They were joined by Power, who was so hopping mad that his face was redder than the red breastplate and cape that adorned him. Afraid no longer, Nobody spoke in a choking voice to the three lords.

“Alas, I am sad to say that the failure of my plan portends the doom of the young man Boy, who has spoken

so eloquently this day about life’s true merits.” Nobody turned to Boy. “I beg your forgiveness for my folly,” he said with tears trickling down as Fame, Fortune and Power eyed Boy’s neck.

“Do not hold yourself to blame, kind Nobody,” Boy said. “I could well have chosen a favour to save my soul. But alas I am a simple fellow who cannot tell a falsehood. It is I who should beg forgiveness for this weakness of mine.”

Nobody wept as the lords unsheathed their swords and Boy consoled Sheep, Cow and Horse. “Ever more so I beg your forgiveness, beloved friends. I thought I could lie, but in the end I could not. Fare well and farewell, dear ones, my companionship and grooming were but mere trifles. You shall not miss me long.”

Boy hugged his dear companions who now wept, then walked forward to Fame, Fortune and Power. “I am prepared to face your sentence,” he said to the great lords unafraid.

X

THE THREE LORDS HUDDLED before carrying out Boy's execution. When they faced him once more, Fame said, most formally, "We are prepared to proceed."

"Only it is not as you foresee, for you shall live," Fortune said.

"Aye," Power said. "Contrary to Nobody's thought otherwise, his plan has ended on a high note.

"It has?" a baffled Nobody said. "How so, pray tell?"

"Listen and you shall find out," Fame said. He turned to Boy. "Lad, I am sure I speak for all of us when I tell you that today you have rendered us a great service. For today you have taught us the unrivaled virtues of family, friendship and brotherhood, a lesson we were too caught up in our vain selves to learn on our own. For that good deed we humbly request you do us the honor of chanting together, so that we may grant you any wish you desire."

Fortune and Power nodded heartily in agreement.

“Tis within the grasp of your lordships to grant anything?” Boy asked in wonder.

“Aye,” said Fortune. “Alone we are confined to our individual blessings. But if we work in tandem we can bestow greater favours. And if we all work together, we can bring about anything.”

Boy pondered for many a minute, for such a wish was not to be squandered lightly and he wanted to make sure he made the very most of it.

“Aha, I have it!” he finally said, snapping his fingers.

“Name it and it shall be yours,” Power said.

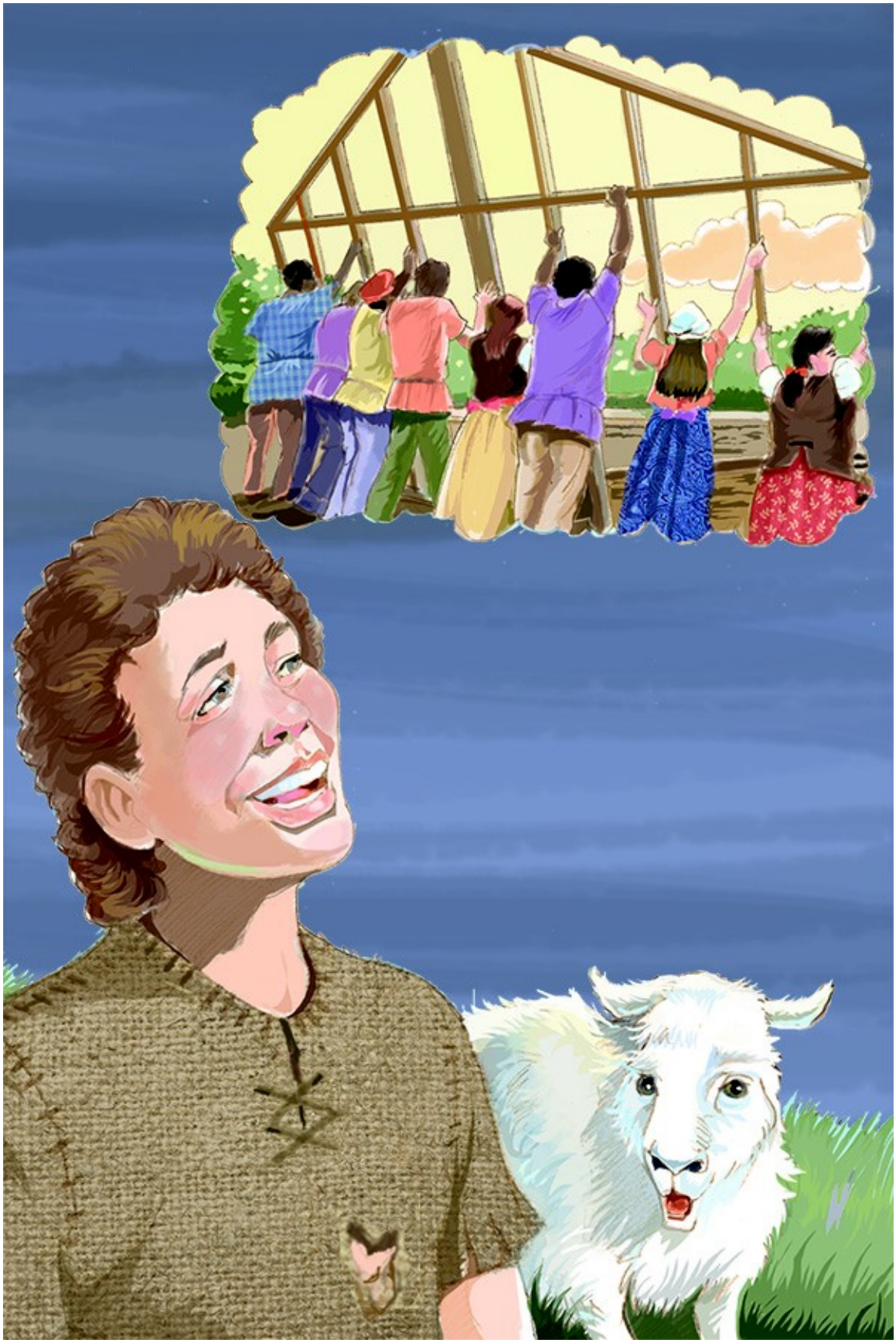
“Not mine but that of everybody in the world,” Boy said. He embraced and shook an astounded Fortune so hard that the lord’s gold caps clattered. “Tis you who inspired me, sire.”

“I?”

“Aye. You said that all together we can bring about anything, so that is what I wish!”

“I fear I do not fathom your meaning.”

“Do you not see? What I would like is a world where all work together as family, friends, and brothers and sisters to accomplish anything. United, we can make a pretty world for all!”



“Tis true,” Fame said.

“And we can make it happen by working together ourselves,” Fortune said happily.

“To bring about the truest greatest blessings—family, friends and brotherhood!” Power proclaimed.

“To family, friends and brotherhood!” Nobody rejoiced.

“A moment,” Fame suddenly said.

“Why doth your face appear pale, my fair brother?” Fortune inquired.

“For the reason that should family, friends and brotherhood come to the fore, we shall be put to the aft,” Fame replied.

“Tis true,” Power said nodding.

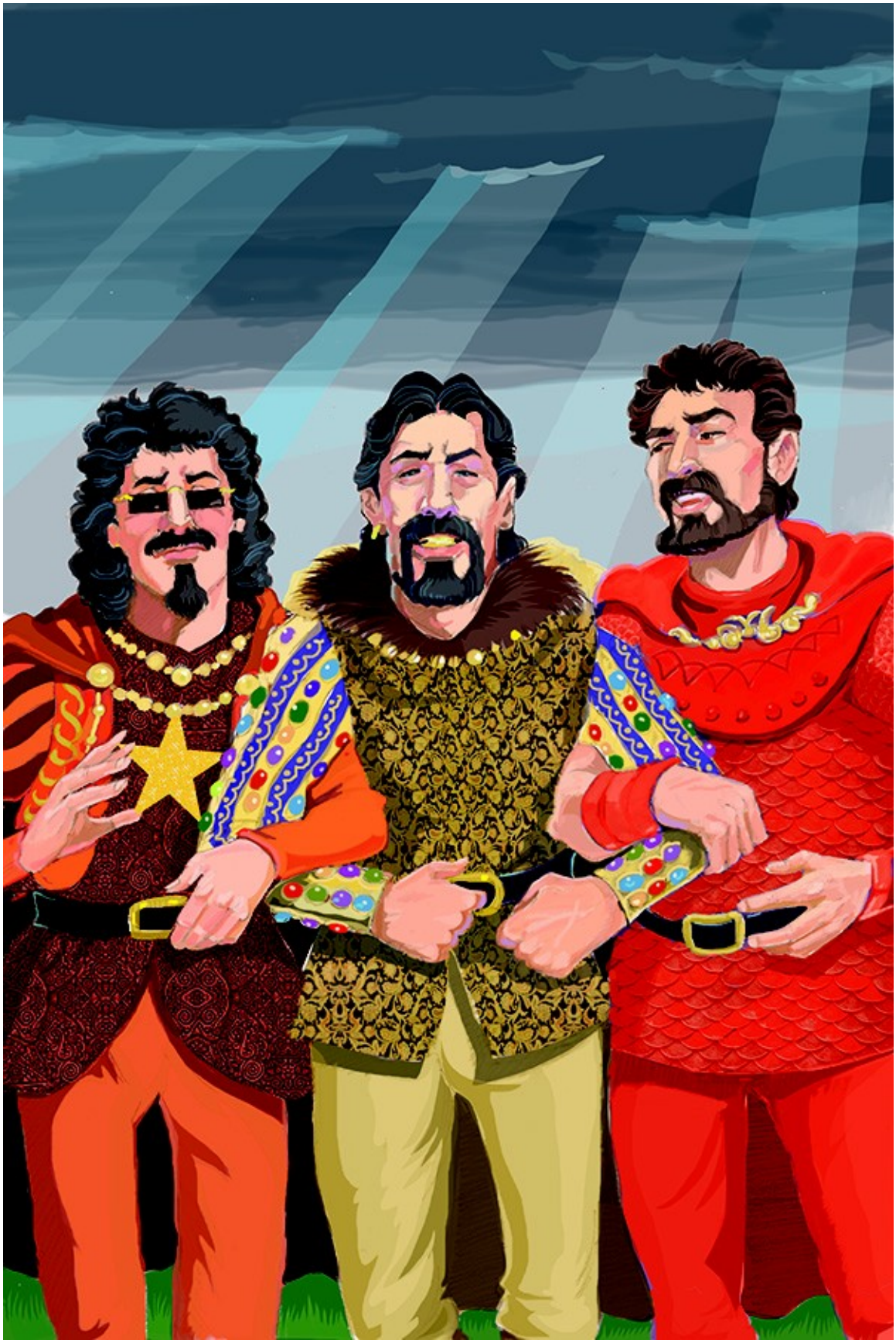
“We shall become an afterthought,” Fame said.

“Can you not make another wish?” Fortune asked Boy with desperation in his voice.

“I am sorry for your plight but I shall not yield in my choice,” Boy answered shaking his head. Following his example, Sheep, Cow and Horse shook their heads as well.

The three brothers looked like the sky had fallen, with only Power finding the strength to speak. “We have offered to fulfill your fondest wish, and so we shall abide,” he said in a firm but grim voice to Boy. “Come brothers, we must bear up—let us join in chant with strong hearts,” he said with a stiff upper lip to Fame and Fortune, even though his heart was heavy over the looming end of his and his brothers’ reign of supremacy.

The lords sadly linked arms and then, for the first time ever, chanted together in harmony to conjure something greater than the sum of what each could summon on his own. Thus was born the saying that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus Boy’s wish came true.



XI

AND SO THAT DAY Fame, Fortune and Power learned from Boy that family, friends and brotherhood were the greatest blessings, and not their namesake favours that they had thoughtlessly thought were so all-important. It was a lesson they dearly prized, but one they paid for dearly with a wish that made their favours secondary. Unable to accept their diminished position the brothers went into retirement at their fabulous paradise, and left fame, fortune and power for people to achieve on their own. Thus forced to fend for himself the evil farmer soon lost his fortune, and was later eaten by ravenous wolves.

Before the brothers departed for home, they granted Nobody consent to remain behind with Boy, Sheep, Cow and Horse. Some days later, the number in the newly enlarged band unexpectedly grew by one more when a witty woman showed up at the farm. Her name was Somebody and from the moment Nobody saw her, his beanpole of a body quivered like it never had before. Not long after her arrival Boy had the same sensation, when a pretty chambermaid named Girl appeared in flight on the shanty threshold. Abandoned as a babe she had been abused by a farmer’s

cruel wife, who also mistreated three beloved companions Girl had stolen away with (after leaving a few tuppence in payment), Ewe, Steer and Mare. Boy and Girl fell in love and decided to become husband and wife.

Nobody performed the marriage ceremony with Sheep and Horse serving as Boy’s co-best men and Cow as Girl’s maid of honor. After they tied the knot, Girl insisted that Boy fix up his dreary dwelling into a proper home, replete with fluffy beds and plush pens. She also insisted that he shear Sheep so that she could make him a proper suit of clothes to replace his age-old torn burlap shirt and pants.

On their first anniversary Boy and Girl welcomed beautiful twins, Hugh and Daisy, into the world. They were followed soon after with the offspring of Sheep, Cow and Horse, who were named Shaggy, Cuddly and Husky. They all prospered for many a year, happy to live in a bright new world where family, friends and brotherhood outshined fame, fortune and power as the greatest blessings.